



# Oxfam India's Recommendations for Forest-Dependent Community in the wake of COVID-19 Pandemic

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The world today is grappling with an unprecedented phenomenon in the COVID-19 pandemic. As of now, the global cases are approaching 2.9 million including over 206,000 fatalities. In India despite stringent lockdown measures the total case count is exceeding 27,000 with a fatality of nearly 900<sup>1</sup>. The trajectory of the pandemic has also shown that it is class agnostic and in fact the developed countries with far better health infrastructure have suffered the most so far.

While COVID-19 impacts everybody, the implications on the poor and marginalized sections such as the daily wage labourers, forest dwellers and informal sector workers with inadequate economic and social safety nets is severe and will have long term consequences on their lives and livelihoods. This has turned this health emergency into a humanitarian crisis. The forest dwellers with small agricultural land holdings who often inhabit very remote and difficult terrains have been missing from the discourse. The lockdown is beginning to have serious implications on the Tribal and forest dwelling communities in India.

In light of this, Oxfam India which works closely with tribals and other traditional forest dwellers through its local partners and networks, lists a few recommendations for central and state governments.

## Why are Tribals and Other Forest Dependent Communities Vulnerable?

In remote forest-fringe villages, about 300 million Tribals and other local people depend on forest as their main source of livelihood and cash income from fuelwood and forest produce<sup>2</sup>. For the [particularly vulnerable tribal groups \(PVTGs\)](#), the dependence on [minor forest produce](#), for food, shelter, medicines as well as critical subsistence during the lean seasons, is even more acute.

As per the Socio Economic Caste Census 2011, 73 percent of rural tribal households are deprived. Agriculture and Minor Forest Produces (MFPs) are the two major sources of livelihoods for these communities. Unfortunately, the lockdown, which began in March, coincided with the MFP harvesting season which prohibited people from collecting and selling their produce as the markets shut down. These produce provide the much needed cash incomes. Window of sale of MFPs are short and time bound and if not procured and stored, the products have no value. Communities from Odisha and Chhattisgarh are already reporting income loss. Two critical needs at this juncture are cash in hand and food.

Additional to these, community members seek temporary employment under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), as construction labourers in urban centers or as agriculture labour in adjoining villages. The reverse migration of these labourers from cities, with no jobs and no source of incomes will add to the tribal distress. Lack of wage labour opportunities, pending MGNREGA payments from last year, no cash in hand or inflow of remittances for agriculture has created a situation of uncertainty. Need for immediate relief package and food supply through PDS in the remote areas inhabited by forest dependent communities is urgent.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/XII/0586-C1.htm>

## Recommendations

In light of the given situation, Oxfam India recommends that the government, both centre and the states take the following steps to ensure that Tribals and other forest-dependant communities aren't left behind.

- **Proper implementation of minimum support price (MSP) and procurement of MFPs:**

Minister for Tribal Affairs has already written to the Chief Ministers of 15 States and to the State Nodal Agencies suggesting to procure MFPs at Minimum Support Price (MSP) and to coordinate with Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) for any support. TRIFED too has written to find ways to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on MFP-based trade. Under the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Vikas Yojana, 15,000<sup>3</sup> Van Dhan centres are to be converted into social distancing cum livelihood centres to provide relief, ration and awareness to forest communities. However, these facilities are primarily to provide infrastructural support for procurement cum value addition to locally available MFPs. Till Dec 2019, 674 Van Dhan Kendras have been sanctioned and there is low utilisation of the funds sanctioned and the reporting mechanisms on progress from the States are poor. On the positive side, the Chhattisgarh government has increased the MSP for *mahua* flowers from Rs. 17 to Rs. 30 per Kg. This is much needed and a welcome step one which other states need to follow. Some states such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have allowed collection, procurement and marketing of MFPs.

However, what is unclear is the process they will follow for implementing this. Mobility restrictions and lack of transportation in many villages is making it difficult for selling the agricultural and forest produce. High value crops such as brinjal and tomatoes are rotting away in the field as per report from Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Traders are finding it difficult to reach the village to buy the MFPs because of the barricade and for fear of contracting the virus. In Odisha, in mining rich districts like Keonjhar with a large influx of outsiders, the district administration is strictly following the lock down. The local community is therefore unable to collect the forest produce. Subsequent orders by the government has of course allowed for collection and procurement of MFPs. Given the perishable nature of the MFPs urgent action is important.

Clear guidelines need to be given regarding MFP procurement to the state nodal agencies such as the Tribal Development Co-operative Corporations (TDCC)/state forest development corporation's/MFP federations. engaging local self help groups (SHGs) to collect from individual collectors is also an option that can be explored, as also specifying regulations for private traders to protect the collectors from being exploited. The Van Dhan Centres or panchayat bhawans can be used for storage during this time till the produce is transported.

- **Strengthen healthcare systems in tribal areas:**

While the disease clusters are still concentrated in the cities and major town centres, the reverse migration of labourers to rural areas gives reason for concern of community transmission. Health care systems in the tribal areas are weak and in case of serious outbreaks, the systems are not capable to handle such pressure. Given the poor status of healthcare resources in most of rural and remote areas, taking early measures is critical. Additionally, there is a serious issue with access to these healthcare facilities. For example, according to the Brookings India Health Monitor (2018 estimates), in Odisha's Keonjhar district, only 4% villages have a PHC within 5 kilometre (km) radius, and only 3% villages have access

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<sup>3</sup> <https://pib.nic.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1612686>

to a CHC within 10 km radius. Similarly, in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district, only about 14% of villages have PHCs within a 5 km radius.

Effective measures should be taken to strengthen the health infrastructure, testing kits, labs and health care professionals like pathologists, trained doctors and nurses must be hired in these regions. In the mining affected districts where the community and workers have weak immunity and are more susceptible to infections, the use of District Mineral Funds (DMFs) for providing health care must be sanctioned<sup>4</sup>.

- **Direct Cash Transfer:**

The Scheduled Tribes are India's poorest people, with five of 10 falling in the lowest wealth bracket, according to the 2015-2016 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4). Experts suggest that direct cash transfers to the poorest especially the labourers who have lost their livelihood due to the lockdown must be considered. There are emerging concerns about direct benefit transfer (DBT), based on the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) architecture, which allows direct transfer of government-sanctioned welfare funds to bank accounts of the beneficiaries as many people in rural areas, particularly migrant labourers, do not have bank accounts.

In such cases, clear directions by the finance ministry is required to be able to transfer relief funds<sup>5</sup>. The MSP scheme of the Union Govt. for marketing of MFPs has an outlay of Rs 60 crore between 2016-19<sup>6</sup>, the states also have their kitty which is largely lying unused. This fund and the bonus from the tendu patta sale typically given in August can be released now to ensure the tribal labourers have money in their hands. In mining affected districts the underutilised DMF funds should also be released for direct cash transfers for at least the next 3 months. State Governments must ensure that the cash transfers recently announced by the central government reach the community, especially, widows, elders and persons with disability (PwD).

- **Proper implementation of universal PDS:**

The lack of wages and income will eventually push lakhs of tribals into poverty and hunger. There is a huge shortage of food and essential items in these areas. As suggested by many experts and economists, the excess food stocks of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) must be released, transported and made available to the poor families across the country.

In the past few weeks, several states such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Telangana have decided to universalise their PDS, and give free grains to those who don't have a ration card. However, unless clear guidelines are there, the implementation of universal PDS will not be guaranteed<sup>7</sup>. States like Delhi have started a system of e-coupons to give ration which relies on having a smartphone and the physical presence of the beneficiary making it difficult to reach the poor migrant labourers and disabled or old people.

Clear guidelines must be given to the district administration for universal PDS distribution for at least 6 months with special emphasis on these categories-BPL, Persons with Disability (PWD), Aged (Annapurna) and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). While rice is being provided in some places such as Chhattisgarh, the PDS needs to expand the nature of items under it to meet sanitation and food security needs in these areas and include rice/ wheat, sugar, salt and spices, pulses, edible oil, washing soap and detergent.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/06/utilising-district-mineral-foundation-funds-to-fight-the-covid-19-crisis-in-india-current-and-future-opportunities/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/banking/finance/banking/relief-package-for-the-poor-via-dbt-may-face-hurdles/articleshow/74878731.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/covid-19-minor-forest-produce-scheme-can-come-to-tribals-rescue-say-experts-69971>

<sup>7</sup> [https://wap.business-standard.com/article-amp/economy-policy/states-push-ahead-to-include-non-card-holders-for-free-rations-under-pds-120042001287\\_1.html](https://wap.business-standard.com/article-amp/economy-policy/states-push-ahead-to-include-non-card-holders-for-free-rations-under-pds-120042001287_1.html)

- **Ensuring MGNREGA wages/jobs and in absence of jobs, minimum wages:** Government has opened up MGNREGA work recently. While the government in its notification on 15 April did announce that all pending MGNREGA wages should be disbursed by April 10, this has not yet happened. The Finance Ministers' announcement of providing an average of 2000 rupees extra per household through MGNREGA is not really an increment but just an inflation adjusted rate<sup>8</sup>.

What is needed now is immediate sanctioning of work, release of pending payments, advance payment of wages for at least 50 days of work and increasing the number of days of work beyond 100 days in all fifth schedule areas. Given the situation of rural distress with large number of returning migrants many more collective and individual work needs to be opened under MNREGA such as community forest management plantations, preparing nurseries, protection and management of Community Forest Rights areas.

- **Withdraw regressive policies issued by MOEFCC:**

For one, the advisory that restricts community's access to protected areas to avoid transmission of the virus to the animals without any scientific basis will severely threaten the lives and livelihood of forest dependent communities. This must be withdrawn immediately.

Second, the regressive EIA draft notification that provides for a reduction of time period from 30 days to 20 days for the public to submit their responses during a public hearing for any application seeking environmental clearance. The current notification, if it comes into force, is a move towards seeking investment irrespective of any adverse environmental consequences that could follow. This notification would need more debate and discussion with stakeholders and needs to be initiated once the situation normalises. For now, it should be withdrawn immediately.

- **Supporting Agriculture and creating livelihoods as a part of a long term solution:**

In Chhattisgarh, community workers have shared that in some families, they are consuming the paddy kept as seeds for oncoming agriculture season, thus, making them vulnerable to losing input for next crop.

It is important that the small landholders who have individual forest rights title (IFR) are provided **free seeds and fertilisers** to ensure food security and livelihood with dignity.

- **Engage local NGOs, volunteers and organisations to provide humanitarian assistance in the remote areas in collaboration with the Government machinery:**

The Government should engage with the networks of Non-Governmental Organisations/Civil Society Organisations/Women's Rights Organisations especially the ones working on issues of migrant labour and delivery of welfare schemes. This will help to ensure that the benefits of the government schemes are accessible and available to poor migrant workers especially the women without discrimination. States such as Delhi, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Kerala that have collaborated with NGOs in the relief operations have been able to increase their outreach, supply of dry ration, cooked food, protective equipment's and sanitary supplies to the most vulnerable who would otherwise get left out.

<sup>8</sup> <https://caravanmagazine.in/noticeboard/citizens-response-to-covid-relief-package-nirmala-sitharaman>



## Proactive measures taken by the Central, State Government and Nodal Ministry

- The Government of India has planned for relief measures for forest-dwelling tribals, which includes free ration, exemptions and digital awareness programmes through converting the 15,000 Van Dhan Centres across the country into Physical Distancing Awareness cum Livelihood Centres. It has also indicated that, Rs 50-75 crore is being set aside to infuse cash into the hands of the tribals<sup>9</sup>.
- Minister of Tribal Affairs, Arjun Munda has written a letter to the Chief Ministers of 15 States to advise the State Nodal Agencies for undertaking procurement of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) at Minimum Support Price (MSP) in right earnest<sup>10</sup>.
- The Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) has written to the Chief Secretaries and all State level nodal agencies regarding combating the impact of COVID-19 on Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP) trade and Tribal interest<sup>11</sup>.
- The Government of Chhattisgarh, was quick to respond during the crisis and wrote to all District Collectors to resume the transportation, storage and collection activities of MFPs during COVID-19 crisis<sup>12</sup>. The Govt also ordered distribution of PDS ration for 2 months, and mid-day meals.
- In Odisha, collection, procurement and marketing of MFPs has been allowed including tendu leaf collection although there is no mention on the modus operandi<sup>13</sup>.
- Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh directed that arrangements should be made for the purchase of MFPs through the Minor Forest Produce Federation including tendu patta. He has mentioned necessary facilities should be ensured for the Tribals<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1612686>

<sup>10</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=201094>

<sup>11</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1610618>

<sup>12</sup> Chhattisgarh Forest Dept. circular dated 03.04.20

<sup>13</sup> Odisha Revenue & Disaster Management Dept. circular dated 13.04.20

<sup>14</sup> <https://orissadiary.com/madhya-pradesh-cm-shivraj-singh-chouhan-directed-officials-to-increase-number-of-corona-testing-labs/>